JOSEPH ISHILL & the ORIOLE PRESS

BY JACQUES MESNIL

Borba
C.I.R.A.
24910

WOODCUT BY LOUIS MOREAU

Joseph Ishill

(1934)

JOSEPH ISHILL & the ORIOLE PRESS

BY JACQUES MESNIL

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY ROSE FREEMAN-ISHILL

THE ORIOLE PRESS

BERKELEY HEIGHTS, NEW JERSEY

GEORG BRANDES - I highly esteem your idealism & have read your [Peter Kropotkin] book with the deepest interest . . .

ELIE FAURE - I have found it splendid, the [Kropotkin volume] still more so when I learned that it was piously printed by hand. It is worthy from every point of view of the great man to whose glory it has been consecrated. . . . I do not know if there are in America many men like you, but I assure you, there is none like you in Europe. Thanks again with all my heart, dear Mr. Ishill. You have one more friend in France.

HAVELOCK ELLIS - It is a fine achievement, simply as a piece of artistic craftsmanship . . . It is a book I am proud to possess [Elie & Elisée Reclus.] It is a most valuable and comprehensive record, quite apart from the question of beautiful book-production, you have done a fine and useful work in bringing the material together . . . It is satisfactory that in devoting yourself to typography you mean to continue producing work expressive of great ideals.

SOPHIE KROPOTKIN - The [Kropotkin] book is a piece of art. It is exhibited in our museum, and much admired. I am often myself guiding the visitors, then I take out the book from the case and read to them your introduction . . .

¶ This brochure was handset with the Cromwell types for text and Goudy's Hadriano for title. Printed in the Spring of 1958.

Pen and ink drawing — By PAUL CEZANNE

JOSEPH ISHILL & THE ORIOLE PRESS

THE ORIOLE PRESS has nothing in common with a commercial enterprise and its products, however complete their technical perfection and formal beauty, is not to be ranged beneath the rubric "editions de luxe;" their creator would be the first to protest against such classification. At different occasions he has insisted upon the fact that the resplendent westment of his publications is not created solely to scintillate and must not serve as a bait for the use of that portion of the public which collects costly volumes: "if the

literary quality of a work which I consider with the intention of publication does not interest me, I renounce doing it. Typography is nothing but a means of giving adequate expression to works which call forth the skill of the craftsman and the faculties of the artist by the qualities which are inherent in them, and not by their external form."

¶ The choice of works which he has printed and edited (for he alone is the printer and editor of the Oriole Press) is HIS choice and very clearly shows his tastes and tendencies. From 1916 onward, he had worked at Stelton, New Jersey in the capacity of printer and organizer of *The Modern School Magazine*, a libertarian school as free from prejudices of traditional education as can be possible in a country which does not drag behind itself a ponderous academic past,—and he had already issued several booklets.

¶ But Ishill always wishes to go further in the perfection of his art; an unedited book by Elie Reclus, PLANT PHYSIOGNOMIES, had already for long appealed to him. In the winter of 1929-1930 he concentrated his attention upon it: "I am almost certain that this book will surpass in beauty and in typographical mastery everything which I have created up to now. I wish this to be a monument to the memory of Elie Reclus who is forgotten even by those who pretended to adhere to his ideas — which, naturally does not hinder my plans since they are always above material aims. It is perhaps for this reason that I must constantly struggle against circumstances which are opposed to the desires of my heart. But from the harshness of fate and from my sorrow I draw a certain nourishment which is a sort of bitter and fortifying tonic."

¶ In 1931, when he had just finished this masterpiece, illustrated by the excellent French artist, Louis Moreau, one of his customary collaborators, affiliated with him as much through an affinity of social opinions as artistic conceptions—the crisis which began to torment the United States also affected him; his salary was reduced to one-half and could no longer even suffice for the material support of his wife and collaborator, Rose Freeman-Ishill, and their three children. He had to relinquish a good number of his subjects, but rather than altogether renounce his work he exhausts his last reserves in a new attempt which may, he thinks, win more interest from the public: it is an annual anthology entitled, FREE VISTAS [Vol. I, 1933,] which will comprise pages from some of the authors and artists dearest to him. To each contribution he will arrange a particular typo-

graphical form, both as to type and format.

¶ But the first important work which came from his press (which he had first called the "Free Spirit Press") was a collection of tributes to the memory of Peter Kropotkin, printed during the year of 1923. At Berkeley Heights, not far from NewYork, this proletarian, (for it is thus he loves to designate himself,) returned in the evenings after his day of toil in the metropolis, to his "bungalow," in the peace of the country-side, and began composing and printing the text of this book in honor of Kropotkin for friends and admirers of the great author, who in that volume contributed their testimonials and reminiscences, in full awareness of what he owed him and what he owed them,—a book simple in its perfection, published in only seventy-five copies upon a small hand-press, with the minute care of an artisan of the middle-ages.

¶ Every one of his books which followed is, by the same right, an act of faith and acknowledgment by its creator. For he organizes the spiritual composition of them as he organizes their material composition; he solicits collaborations and chooses the texts with as much care and in the same spirit as the type characters. These books are his life: Of the larger volume on the brothers Elie & Elisee Reclus he writes: "I have consecrated, (1927) two years of work and all the financial means which a wage-earner can dispose of. For me this is not a duty but a testament of love and admiration."

¶ This time the number of copies is greater and some are for sale. It was the same with the volume on Havelock Ellis "a tribute to that charming and audacious personality," also as perfect in presentation as in documentation and published in 1929. It will result in a sort of pattern of an extreme virtuosity which especially reveals the mastery of the craftsman. This compilation has brought about for us the acquaintance with an English artist, and one of the first rank, John Buckland Wright, who has retained the sense, very rare today, of formal beauty.

¶ In spite of all the interest it admits of, even from a purely typographical point of view, this tentative, resolves itself, economically speaking, into a disaster. But what does it matter! Ishill has not given up braving a contrary fate: "I have not abandoned my intellectual aims," he writes August 28, 1935: "and from time to time I mean to continue publishing things which appeal to me, even though I lack the market by which the few copies I am capable of producing can be disposed of. Nevertheless, I will not relinquish my hobby as long as there is breath in

me and the aspirations for things of beauty. I have just finished the second and third volumes of unpublished poems by John Evelyn Barlas which I have undertaken at a great personal sacrifice and at time when I have not even the necessary funds. But because of the poet I am happy that my work is brought to a good finish. Perhaps in a not too distant future when a certain part of Utopia will have been realized, Barlas the troubadour, forgotten by the English proletariat, will be honored; I am sure they will also remember the printer of these small volumes of which every word has been set up with a heart palpitating during the course of the unforgettable tragedy of this crisis."

¶ We need not be surprised that such an exalted conception of the printed book should have no success at a period when the public sees typographical art in the guise of poster and catch-word, and demands above all else the element of surprise and disorientation through unusual presentation.

«ARTS ET METIERS GRAPHYQUES»
May 15, 1938. Paris, (France.)